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Session Watch: Counties Visit Capitol and the Finance Committee Gets Specific

By Senator Carlos Uresti

The Capitol has been a busy place, as my office has hosted leaders from Uvalde, Zavala, Kinney, and Maverick counties for county days. Each delegation provided me with meaningful insight on legislation that will directly impact their county. I appreciate our leaders for making the trip and sharing their legislative priorities, and I am eager to welcome more counties in the coming weeks.

Texas' troubled Child Protective Services (CPS) and foster care systems are back at the forefront. This past week, the Senate Health & Human Services Committee passed Senate Bill 11 on to the full Senate. SB 11 is a package of bipartisan reforms I am joint-authoring that would reform CPS in order to address the state's systematic failure to protect vulnerable youth.

For the second session in a row, I've been named to the budget workgroup on the Article 2 health & human services section of the state budget. Membership on a workgroup gives a Senator a greater voice on that respective article of the budget, and I intend to let our children's voices be heard in order to "get it right". I aim to ensure that our CPS case workers are well-trained, competitively paid, and motivated to work even harder to protect our kids.

The workgroup process is a relatively unknown – but important – phase of the budget writing process. After receiving the base budget outline and quickly reviewing each article as a full committee, the Senate Finance Committee breaks into workgroups of five Senators charged with reviewing individual articles of the budget in great detail, and reviewing budget riders, which are essentially change requests to the budget submitted by individual Senators. We leave no stone unturned – and within the next few weeks we will present recommendations on effectively allocating our budget in these areas back to the full committee.

No matter where you live in Texas, you've probably read news reports of an improper teacher-student relationship in a school district. The Senate Education Committee met to discuss legislation to prevent improper relationships between teachers and students and ensure those teachers who violate our trust by abusing children are not able to simply transfer to a neighboring school district.

I'm working with my colleagues across the aisle as a coauthor of Senate Bill 7, because I believe we can't allow a handful of teachers to overshadow the great work going on in classrooms across the state by tens of thousands of teachers. We want to get this bill right the first time, so we've

held in back in committee for an extra week to ensure we get the language of the bill exactly right. This is common, because in law, for example, the difference between “should have known” and “had probable cause to believe” could have profoundly different results in practice, so we want to take extra care to get it right.

More of my own bills have begun to be scheduled for hearings. Senate Bill 497 addresses low morale and high turnover among CPS staff by creating an office of workforce analytics, which would investigate workforce issues within the department and produce honest and transparent assessments. Maintaining a stable workforce will allow CPS to improve its ability to protect Texas kids, be a more efficient agency, and save the taxpayer money.

Lastly, Senate Bill 495 will improve a court’s ability to take into consideration the risk of a parent or individual who under a mediated settlement agreement could have unsupervised access to the child. Essentially, SB 495 would allow judges to make more informed decisions to avoid putting children in homes with potential sexual abusers.

I hope to continue advancing these bills, as well as my other priorities, over the next few weeks. If there is an issue that you would like to provide feedback on, I hope you will email my office at carlos.uresti@senate.texas.gov, or call (512) 463-0119. Semper Fi!

Session Watch is a bi-weekly column by State Senator Carlos Uresti to provide a first-hand account of the ongoing 85th Legislative Session.

Sen. Uresti represents Senate District 19, which covers more than 35,000 square miles and contains all or part of 17 counties, two international ports of entry, eleven state parks, 51 school districts, 2700 miles of highways, and more than 23,000 producing oil and gas wells in both the Eagle Ford Shale and Permian Basin. The district is larger than 12 states and 82 Nations, and contains over one third of the Texas-Mexico border. Sen. Uresti is proud to serve on the Finance, Education, and Veteran Affairs & Border Security Committees and as Vice Chair of the Health & Human Services Committee.